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ABSTRACT

The nature of grammatical relations such as subject and object are examined. The ways in which subjects differ from language to language are described and the way in which a language can do without a subject relation is revealed. Three primitive functional properties of sentences which underlie the syntactic relations of subject and topic are explained. These are: (1) the role-defining property, a syntactic device used by all languages for coding information about the argument roles of agent, patient, experiencer, etc.; (2) the orientation property wherein what is in the subject position alters the perspective or orientation of the sentence; and (3) the definiteness property by which definiteness is assigned to an argument based on the speaker's assumptions about the possibility of the listener identifying the argument from previous discourse. Some characteristics of subjects and orientations are briefly mentioned. (PMJ)

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ON SUBJECTS AND TOPICS

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I. Grammatical relations such as subject and object have been part of the traditional inventory of categories of Western grammatical description. In practical descriptive works, for the most part, the use of such terms has been relatively uncontroversial despite the great diversity of the syntactic realization of these relations, and the kinds of semantic-pragmatic information they encode.[1]

Recently a number of proposals regarding the nature of these relations have been made. These proposals may be conveniently grouped into two general categories:

1. Grammatical relations such as subject and object are primitive notions of grammatical theory, distinct from semantic or pragmatic notions such as agent, patient, or topic, and not definable in purely structural terms (the existence of VSO and VOS languages would, in any case, make a uniform definition difficult). This approach has been put forth most notably by the proponents of relational grammar (see Johnson 1974 and Perlmutter and Postal (this volume)).
2. Grammatical relations are secondary properties of sentences, definable in terms of some more primitive properties or relations:
   2a. Grammatical relations are definable grammatically, either in terms of structural relations (expressed in terms of bracketings) in either basic or derived structure (Chomsky 1965), or in terms of the kind of syntactic properties possessed and grammatical relations entered into by a given element (as in Keenan's (1976) 'cluster' approach to defining subject[2]).
   2b. Grammatical relations may be defined according to some semantic or pragmatic criteria, ie a functional definition. This is the approach taken by Chafe (1976) in his discussion of subject, and one can infer such an approach in discussions by other linguists, such as Li and Thompson (1976).

Proponents of the second set of approaches could live more comfortably with the idea that subject and object were not universal categories, since it might turn out that in some language the more basic categories in terms of which notions like subject and object are derived might arrange themselves in such a way that no element like subject would play a role. For proponents of the first approach, the non-existence of subjects and objects in some language would be more disturbing, since a general account of how and why proposed primitives

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may or may not appear in the grammar of particular languages would have to be provided.

It should be pointed out that the differences between these approaches may turn out, like so many issues in linguistic theory, to be more apparent than real. For the time being, however, it seems worthwhile to pursue these approaches to see where they may lead. In this paper, I would like to outline a proposal for dealing with the notion 'subject' from a functional point of view, comparing and contrasting subject with the syntactic relation 'topic', as manifested, for instance, in Mandarin (see Li and Thompson 1976 for discussion). In the course of this discussion I would like to show that subject can be given a relatively simple definition which will allow an explanation of typical subject properties. Also, I would like to discuss how subjects differ from language to language and how a language can do without a subject relation.

II. In this section I will introduce three primitive functional properties of sentences which I will claim underlie the syntactic relations of subject and topic.

A. The Role-defining Property

All languages have some syntactic device for coding information about argument roles such as agent, patient, experiencer, etc. It should be pointed out at the onset, however, that while all languages have such devices, they are not used with the same degree of consistency across languages. For instance, in English it is always the case that agent-patient distinctions are maintained in contrastive sentences like the cleft construction, so that

(1) It's John that Thomas hit

cannot be confused with

(2) It's John that hit Thomas

But in Irish, the sentence

(3) Is é Seán a bhuail Tomás

could mean either (1) or (2). (3) is ambiguous in isolation, but the assignment of roles would be clear in discourse, since (3) would not be said unless the backgrounded material were understood in the discourse context, which would include the relation of Thomas to the verb hit. In Squamish, for example, the sentence

(4) na č'ɛ́m?tas ta Tam ta Pít̓a

could mean either (5) or (6) (Kuipers 1967, p. 170):

(5) Tom bit Peter

(6) Peter bit Tom

Interpretation (6) would need the support of discourse; (5) would otherwise be the interpretation. In both of the above cases, role assignment is clear in context,

though the sentences may seem ambiguous in isolation. Both Irish and Squamish do, however, have devices for disambiguating sentences like those given above without the aid of context, though all languages do not possess such devices and may rely on context to a greater degree than those languages do.

Coding systems for argument roles may be divided into two general classes. The first and most direct involves overtly marking each argument in some fashion for the role it plays in the sentence so that, for instance, an agent would be overtly marked with some agentive marker, a patient with a patient marker and so on. Systems based on some variation of this theme may be referred to as 'direct role marking' systems. Tagalog appears to be direct role marking system. In Tagalog, very roughly, a simple narrative sentence consists of a verb and a string of arguments, one of which is designated 'topic'[3]. Each argument is accompanied by a particle which marks it for roles like agent-experiencer, goal (patient), direction, and benefactive. In the case of the argument chosen as topic, a special topic particle ang replaces the role particle and the verb is marked with an affix agreeing with the role of the topic (Schachter 1976, Schachter and Otanes 1972). For example, sentences (7-10) differ from each other in that in each one a different role is chosen as topic. The topic is always given a definite interpretation (examples from Schachter 1976, p. 494-5; the underlined noun is topic):

(7) mag-salis ang babae ng bigas sa sako para sa bata
will-take-out woman rice sack child
'The woman will take some rice out of a/the sack for a/the child'

(8) aalisin ng babae ang bigas sa sako para sa bata 'A/the woman will take the rice out of a/the sack for a/the child'

(9) aalisan ng babae ng bigas ang sako para sa bata 'A/the woman will take some rice out of the sack for a/the child'

(10) ipag-salis ng babae ng bigas sa sako ang bata 'A/the woman will take some rice out of a/the sack for the child'

Tagalog is a direct role marking language since, in general, each argument is assigned a marker somewhere in the sentence that identifies the role the argument represents and is unique to that role. The only means for role marking in Tagalog is this method of direct role marking.

Ömie (Austing and Upia 1975) shows many character-

istics of a direct role marking language. Agents, for example, are marked with a suffix -ro~ërō[4] and given a special set of verb agreement affixes. The agentive marker is used with agents in both transitive and intransitive sentences as shown in (11-4):

(11) sigob-ërō ?ajiomajo
snake-agent went-up
'a snake went up'

(12) jabumë-ro rôvë?ë jō
they-agent come-perf be
'they have come'

(13) a-ërō ?ōho ?anadeje
man-agent dog hit
'a man hit the dog'

(14) na-ro hu ?anôdeje
I-agent him hit
'I hit him'

The suffix -ro~ërō is not merely a marker of subject, since non-agents, even when translatable as English subjects, are not marked with -ro~ërō:

(15) ja dadivave
you neg-know
'you don't know'

(16) na sa?a-re bejevadeje
I ground-loc fell
'I fell on the ground'

(17) sa?aho ijo-?e jie
land tree-char. be
'the land has trees'

(18) na juvae ijômu
I coconut eat-want
'I want to eat a coconut'

Other roles may be indicated directly by means of suffixes, such as the benefactive -ni, and various locatives like -r and -nō. Patients and dative/experiencers however are not distinguished directly by affixes, both appearing in Austing and Upia's neutral case, which is unmarked. When dative/experiencers and patients cooccur in a sentence, only the dative/experiencer takes agreement with the verb.

(19) na ja n-eg-e
I you want-1s-pr
'I want you'

(20) na övo dun-eg-e
I arm ache-1s-pr
'I have an aching arm'

In sentences with agents and patients, both the agents and patients take verb agreement:

(21) a-ërō na g-ev-ade-je
man-agent I see-1s-3s-aux
'A man saw me'

(22) na kaejō-ërō nem-ev-ade-je
I knife-agent(see ft. 4) hurt-1s-3s-aux
'I got hurt with a knife' (= a knife hurt me)

The dative/experiencers in (19-20) and the patients in (21-22) take agreement affixes from the same set (called 'direct referents' by Austing and Upia), while the agents in (21-22) take their verb agreement affixes from another set (called 'active subject markers' by Austing and Upia).

Ōmie may be described as a direct role marking language since, on the whole, the assignment of affixes like -ro~ërō and verb agreement possibilities can be

made directly in terms of argument roles without the mediation of subject and object notions.

Direct role marking languages like Tagalog and Ömie are relatively rare. The most usual sort of coding system for argument roles involves the establishment of two hierarchies: a hierarchy of syntactic slots and a hierarchy of argument roles.[5] The hierarchy of syntactic slotsmay involve word order, morphology, or some combination of the two. The hierarchy of argument roles has agents at the top, patients and locatives at the bottom, with the position of other roles quite variable and language specific.[6] The highest ranking syntactic slot will be the one to which the highest ranking role (agent, if one is present) will be assigned in unmarked sentences.[7] The important point here is that the highest ranking slot, usually referred to as 'subject', is not reserved for agents, but, in unmarked sentences, will be assigned to the highest ranking argument present, which, in a given language, could be a patient or an experiencer. For instance, Roscoe is the subject in each of the sentences of (23), yet represents a different role in each case:

(23) Roscoe ran (agent)
Roscoe wants a new Chevy (experiencer)
Roscoe is tall (patient)[8]

In a direct role marking language, we would expect some differentiation in the syntactic slots to which Roscoe would be assigned, made on the basis of the argument roles Roscoe represents in (23).

In English and other languages that employ a system of variable assignment of argument role to syntactic slot (as opposed to a direct assignment of role to syntactic slot as in a direct role marking language), the interpretation of argument roles for nouns in, for instance, subject position (the highest syntactic slot) is indirect, and follows from inferences made by the speaker based on his knowledge of the meaning of the predicate, the presence of other arguments in the sentence, and perhaps other factors like the animacy of the noun[9]. Languages employing such a system may be referred to as 'indirect role marking' languages. From this point of view, the grammatical devices subject and object are relevant only for indirect role marking languages since they function as syntactic slots in a system of coding argument roles that matches highest ranking syntactic slot to highest ranking role. In direct role marking languages arguments are marked directly according to their roles and there exists no syntactic slot, like subject in English (or Russian or Mandarin) which is relevant for role identification and which may be filled, at least potentially, by a

noun representing any argument role.[10] In the rest of this paper I will use subject in the above sense, namely as the highest ranking syntactic slot in an indirect role marking system, regardless of whatever other properties the subject may possess in individual languages.[11]

B. The Orientation Property

Consider the following sentences:

(24) Floyd hit Roscoe

(25) Roscoe was hit by Floyd

These sentences are traditionally described as differing in perspective or point of view, about whom they are contributing information, even though both sentences could be used to describe the same event and logically imply each other. Sentence (24) is contributing information about Floyd, dealing with the scene from his perspective or orientation, while (25) is oriented on Roscoe, and is presenting the same information from his perspective. A similar statement could be made about the following two Russian sentences:

(26) Boris udaril Ivana
Boris-nom. hit Ivan-acc.
'Boris hit Ivan'

(27) Ivana udaril Borisom
'Ivan was hit by Boris'

Like (24-5) above, (26-7) differ in orientation or point of view, yet the sentences are otherwise identical in meaning. In (24-5) there is a difference in grammatical relations: in terms of relational grammar taking (24) as basic, (25) illustrates the promotion of an object to subject and the demotion of subject to the status of an oblique. The relation of (26) and (27), very similar semantically to the relation between (24) and (25), involves only a difference in word order.[12] This illustrates an important difference between English and Russian, namely that the subject in English is also likely to provide the sentence orientation or point of view of the sentence, delimiting the frame within which the rest of the sentence is interpreted.[13] In Russian, on the other hand, initial position is usually reserved for the sentence orientation, and the subject need not be demoted when not the orientation, but can simply be moved out of initial position as in (27). A situation similar in certain respects to the Russian exists in Spanish where the position of the subject and object may be inverted without change in the verbal inflection and with the object retaining its object marker (a for animate nouns). Aside from the change in order, the only other change is the addition of an object pronoun agreeing with the object:[14]

(28) el camión atropelló a los perros
'the truck ran over the dogs'

(29) a los perros los atropelló el camión
'the dogs were run over by the truck'

Hooper 1976 shows that the discourse uses of (29) parallel those of the English passive given as the translation. Initial position in Spanish and Russian is not reserved for subjects (both Spanish and Russian are indirect role marking languages and have subjects), but rather for the sentence orientation. In English, immediate preverbal position is generally reserved for subjects, and sentence inversions of the sort illustrated in (26-7) and (28-9) are not possible in Modern English.[15] When the sentence is oriented on the object, the most convenient way of indicating this in literary English is via the passive[16]; the subject and the sentence orientation are typically the same in English. In Spanish and Russian, the subject and the sentence orientation are more easily separable and can be looked upon as being two separate grammatical entities in these languages which, however, are frequently represented by the same item (as in (26) and (28)).

Mandarin (Li and Thompson 1976) is another example of a language which can easily separate the subject from the sentence orientation. The subject is placed in immediate preverbal position[17], while the sentence orientation, called the topic by Li and Thompson, is in sentence initial position. Frequently the same item will be subject and topic, as in (30) where Zhāng-sān is both in immediate preverbal position and initial position (examples from Li and Thompson):

(30) Zhāng-sān mǎi le piào
Zhang-san buy asp. ticket
'Zhang-san bought a ticket'

Li and Thompson provide numerous examples of cases where the subject and topic are not represented by the same item. (31) illustrates such a sentence:

(31) nèi chang huǒ xiāofángduì láide zǎo
that classifier fire fire-brigade came early
'that fire (topic), the fire-brigade came early'

The topic here expresses the frame of reference in terms of which the rest of the sentence is to be interpreted (see Li and Thompson, Teng 1974, and Barry 1975 for discussions of the semantics of topics in Mandarin). What is important to note here is that there is a relation between the topic in Mandarin and what I have called the orientation in English, Spanish, and Russian. In all of these cases, the choice of an item as the sentence orientation is motivated by the desire to link the predication with previous discourse or background to a discourse by specifying the entity in terms of which it makes sense to assert the rest of the predica-

tion. Linking these elements together under the general rubric of orientation is possible because of their functional similarity, despite the differences in packaging.

What I am calling the orientation is not to be equated with old information since clearly more than just the sentence orientation can be old information (old in a discourse or background to a discourse) in a given context. The problem of the definiteness of sentence orientations will be dealt with below.

The subject per se, it seems, has no specific semantic functions other than its role defining function and whatever semantic consequences follow from the choice of a particular role as subject. The usual statements about the meaning of the subject (what the sentence is about, etc.) pertain rather to the orientation property that often, though not invariably and in varying degrees in different languages, accompanies subjects.

Chafe 1976 claims that subjects are 'what the sentence is about' but topics in languages like Mandarin express the 'spacial, temporal, and individual framework within which the main predication holds'. As sentences (24-9) seem to indicate, it is what I have called the orientation not the grammatical subject that determines what the sentence is about. While there can certainly be spacial and temporal frameworks distinct from orientations (eg Early that morning, Floyd hit Roscoe), it is not clear how an individual framework within which the main predication holds would be distinct from what the sentence is about. In Li and Thompson's example (p. 469),

(32) nèike shù yèzi dà, suǒyi wǒ bu xǐhuān ____
that tree leaves big so I not like
'that tree(topic), the leaves are big so I don't like it'

the deleted object in the second clause can only be understood to refer to the topic that tree, not to the subject those leaves, because the first clause is straightforwardly a statement about that tree, not those leaves. Similarly in English, the pronoun him in Floyd hit Roscoe, so I don't like him would be taken to refer to Floyd because the first clause was a statement about Floyd, whereas in Roscoe was hit by Floyd, so I don't like him, the him refers to Roscoe because the first clause was a statement about Roscoe. The other examples given in Li and Thompson, Teng 1974, and Barry 1975 seem to support this kind of interpretation.

It was stated above that in English the subject

normally is also the sentence orientation. There are, however, sentences in English where this is not the case. There are, for instance, sentences in English that resemble the Chinese topic (or 'double-subject') construction illustrated in (31) and (32) above. (33) illustrated such a sentence:

(33) Ol' George Creech, his son just wrecked his new Chevy

In this sentence, George Creech is not used contrastively; this sentence would be appropriate to open a discourse with.[18] George Creech in (33) provides the frame of reference in which the predication his son just wrecked his new Chevy is to be interpreted. George Creech in (32) is what the sentence is about, not the subject son, and in this way is like the subjects of (24) and (25) in providing the sentence orientation. Many of the examples of Mandarin topic constructions given by Li and Thompson have rough English parallels in constructions like (33). For instance (34)

(34) nèi-ge rén yáng míng George Zhang
that person foreign name George Zhang

has a rough parallel in (35):

(35) that guy over there , his foreign name is
you know that guy George Zhang

Again (35) need not have a contrastive interpretation, but can, so far as I can determine from Chinese informants parallel the meaning of (34). I am not claiming meaning identity, but only enough parallel in function to group nèi-ge rén and that guy over there together under the rubric of sentence orientation.

Sentences like (33) and (35) have interesting properties that merit further investigation. The orientation NP's seem to require some reference inside the main predication, like the possessive pronoun his in both (33) and (35), to show the relation between the orientation and the predication that follows. This relation does not have to be explicitly stated in Mandarin.

C. The Definiteness Property

Definiteness is a property assigned to an argument based on a speaker's assumptions about the possibility of his listener identifying the argument from previous discourse or as background to a discourse. All languages seem to have a way of definitizing (marking as identified or background) at least one noun per sentence. This marking can be accomplished through a system of articles, special referencing devices like topic in Tagalog, or by means of placement of an argument in initial position, as in Russian and Mandarin.[19]

Because of the function of sentence orientations,

they are overwhelmingly likely to be definite, but there do appear to be sentences with indefinite orientations. One apparent characteristic of sentence orientations for which I have no particular explanation at the moment, is that when the orientation and the subject are represented by the same argument, the argument may be indefinite, but when the orientation and the subject are represented by different arguments, the orientation is invariably definite. For example, topics in Mandarin (which are sentence orientations but not subjects) are obligatorily definite (Li and Thompson, p. 461). In English, when the subject and the orientation are the same argument, they may be indefinite:

(36) A couple of people wandered in
Some guy hit Floyd

But when the subject and orientation are not represented by the same item, the orientation cannot be indefinite:

(37) °A guy over there, his foreign name is George Zhang

(cf (35)). Similarly in Spanish, a subject which is also the sentence orientation may be indefinite:

(38) un camión atropelló al perro
'a truck ran over the dog'

But an orientation that is not the subject cannot be indefinite ((39) and its interpretation from Hooper 1976):

(39) ?a un perro lo atropelló el camión

III. In this section I will briefly mention some characteristics of subjects and orientations. The term topic here will refer to sentence orientations that are not also subjects. The discussion that follows owes much to Li and Thompson 1976.

Subjects must necessarily be arguments of verbs since they are by definition the highest ranking slot in a role defining system. Topics need have no special relationship to the verb, but must have some recoverable relation to the predication that follows so that the predication can be about the topic.

Subjects, but not topics naturally play a role in grammatical processes involving argument roles like passive, imperative, verb serialization, etc. They also play a role in processes that deal with relations of arguments within predications (like reflexive) and relations between predications (like equi-deletion) since subjects are intregal parts of predications whereas topics may not be, but may only contribute information about how the predication is is to be interpreted. If a topic is an argument of the verb, it may be able to participate in some of

these grammatical processes like subjects even though it isn't the subject.[20]

Control of coreferential argument deletion or pronominalization does not depend on argument roles. Topics, which express the frame in which the rest of the sentence is interpreted are prime candidates for controlling such deletion.

(40) his son wrecked his new Chevy, and boy was he mad

Compare (40), where a reasonable interpretation of he in the second clause is that it is coreferential with son, with (41)

(41) Ol' George Creech, his son wrecked his new Chevy, and boy was he mad

where he is necessarily coreferential with George Creech not son. Sentence orientations that are not also subjects seem to be more likely to control coreference (cf the definiteness property above).[21]

Footnotes

1. To my knowledge, only in the analysis of some Philippine languages have these relations been seriously challenged and rejected outright. See Schachter 1976 and references given there. These languages will be briefly discussed below.
2. It isn't clear that Keenan intends his subject properties list as anything more than a heuristic for identifying subjects in unclear cases (p. 305). However, he provides us with no other indication there of what he thinks a subject is.
3. The use of the term topic by Philippinists is not to be equated with the use of this term by other linguists. See Schachter 1976, p. 496.
4. This suffix is called 'ablative' by Austing and Upia, and is also used to mark instruments:

hesi ŏv-ĕro ijajeje
his hand-agent he-eats
'He eats with his hand'

5. This way of talking about things derives ultimately from Fillmore 1968, to which the reader is referred for discussion and appropriate qualification.
6. See for instance Noonan (forthcoming) for a discussion of dative-experiencers in relation to this hierarchy and possibilities for subjecthood.
7. Taken to mean 'basic sentence' in Keenan's 1976 sense.
8. My use of the traditional term patient here is rather like Fillmore's 'objective' and Stockwell et al.'s 'neutral' argument roles.
9. Again, see Fillmore 1968 and Platt 1971 for some discussion of this.
10. See Schachter 1976 for discussion of the relevance of the notion subject to Tagalog.

11. True ergative languages, like nominative-accusative languages can be viewed as indirect role marking languages even though the ergative case may be restricted in these languages (e.g. Shina (Bailey 1924) to agents. First of all, not all agents are ergatives, but may, in intransitive sentences, be coded by the nominative case (cf Ömie above, where agents are always given the same marking). Secondly, the nominative case is potentially as viaraible in terms of role assignment as is the subject slot in English, so that a niminative in Shina for example could be used to code an agent, an experiencer or a patient. The hierarchy of grammatical slots and its relation to the hierarchy of rules in an ergative language would have to be slightly more complex than in a nominative-accusative language, but is still a system of the same sort.

12. It should be noted that Russian has a proper passive like English. The passive, while common enough in literary Russian, is relatively rare in spoken Russian. Word order variation as illustrated in (26-7) is common in all styles.

13. This is not to imply that the only difference between (24) and (25) has to do with a difference in orientation. The discourse contexts in which the sentence can be appropriately used differ in a number of ways. An analysis of these differences would go far beyond the scope of this paper, but the following will serve as an illustration of the sort of differences one finds:

What happened to Roscoe?	Floyd hit him.
	He was hit by Floyd.
What did Floyd do?	He hit Roscoe.
	??Roscoe was hit by him.

14. Spanish, like Russian, has a true passive that is not much used.

15. Sentence inversions in Modern English usually involve sentences with the structure S V PP, as in

Up the street waddled the gazerk

16. This is not to say that this is the only use for the passive in English. See for example, Dušková 1971 and 1972 for discussion of the uses of the English passive from the Czech perspective.

17. Like English, Mandarin has some contructions where the verb is not immedialtely preverbal. Teng 1974 discusses a construction where the subject is postposed to post-verbal position:

Wáng Miǎn sǐ-le fùqin
Wang Mian die-asp. father
'Wang Mian lost his father' (= Wang Mian's father died)

The semantics of these discontinuous possessive constructions is discusses by Teng. This construction, like

the English inverted sentence construction, is a departure from the normal immediate preverbal position for subjects in Mandarin. None of the other examples not dealing with this specific construction provided by Teng and none of the examples given by Li and Thompson and Barry 1975 violate this order.

18. Cf remarks by Chafe 1976 p. 50.

19. See Borras and Christian 1959 for some discussion of Russian in this respect. Initial position in Russian is generally reserved for definites and generics.

20. See Chung's 1976 discussion of object preposing in Indonesian, which seems like a candidate for this status.

21. Li and Thompson note that dummy subjects are restricted to subject prominent languages. While it is in general true as they claim that dummy subjects like English it and there seem to occur mainly with subject prominent languages (languages that normally combine subject and orientation), it should be pointed out that the presence of such a feature seems to be restricted to Northwest European languages and might well be considered an areal feature. German, for example, can put any constituent in sentence initial position without changing grammatical relations via some precoess like passive and provide a new sentence orientation. Though German can easily separate subject and orientation, it still has a dummy subject es. Irish does not make regular use of a dummy subject, but does normally combine the sentence orientation with the subject. So even within Northwest Europe, the corelation between subject prominence and dummy subjects does not hold consistently.

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